

## 1 To These Dark Steps

Zoey Fitzpatrick had written off Lilian Adebayo when she disappeared from class after the first four days into the short summer session. Two weeks later, she saw Lilian’s name in an administrative email as one of the students to drop her British Literature class.

She thought nothing of it – nearly fifteen years of teaching had given Zoey a healthy, thick skin – until she saw Lilian in her office doorway, a quiet woman from Nigeria who had not said one word in discussion in the brief time she was in class. At first she didn’t recognize her but then recalled the email and then her face.

“Yes, Lilian?” Zoey asked, all the while wondering why she was there.

“Professor Fitzpatrick,” Lilian declared in her soft, lilting voice, “I just wanted to explain why I had to drop your class.”

“Oh, no, that’s all right --”

“No,” her now-former student interrupted in earnest. “I do not want you to think poorly of me. I really wanted to take this class and finish it. But I had to return to my country.” She paused.

Zoey waited.

“My grandfather was dying, and I wanted to see him one last time.”

“Ah,” Zoey responded, trying to sound sympathetic, even though she thought, *The dying grandparent excuse.*

As if reading her thoughts, Lilian said, “I tried to follow the syllabus and keep up with the readings while away. And I must thank you for this work that you had assigned, *Samson Agonistes*.”

“Oh?” Zoey asked, taken aback.

Then, before Lilian faced what was clearly skepticism on Zoey’s part, she straightened her shoulders like her schoolgirl days in the British school, and she recited, her eyes concentrating on Zoey,

“A little onward lend they guiding hand  
To these dark steps, a little further on;  
For yonder bank hath choice of Sun or shade,  
There I am wont to sit, when any chance  
Relieve me from my task of servile toil,  
Daily in the common Prison else enjoin’d me,

Where I a Prisoner chain'd, scarce freely draw  
The air imprison'd also, close and damp,  
Unwholesome draught: but here I feel amends,  
The breath of Heav'n fresh-blowing, pure and sweet,  
With day-spring born; here leave me to respire.”<sup>1</sup>

Zoey stared back, as this was the first time any student of hers took the time to memorize anything from the readings, especially a student who no longer had need to memorize anything at all for her.

“I must thank you, Professor,” Lilian continued, carefully choosing her words, “because, when my grandfather died one week after I returned back to my village, I was tasked to give his eulogy, and I had your reading to give, for I had read it on the long flight there. That part was easy to remember because it reminded me of my grandfather. He was blinded in a war long ago in my country, and for years he felt useless to his family and his people because of his blindness. But precisely because of his blindness, he was able to have time for us children. I remember him as a wise man, sitting under his favorite tree, telling us children stories of the old ways, before the English came.” She smiled sadly. “So, Professor, it is the words of a dead, blind Englishman that reminded me of the nobility of my grandfather. And it is the words of that blind Milton that bade my grandfather goodbye.”

“I – I’m so sorry for your loss, Lilian.”

Lilian dipped her head slightly. “Thank you. I am sorry I could not finish your class – I hear good things about you on campus – but family, family must come first.”

“Of course. Yes.”

“Will you be teaching the same class in the fall?”

“What? Oh – yes, yes I will.”

“Then I will see if I can take it again, if that is okay with you, if it fits my work schedule.”

“Of course.”

“Thank you, Professor.” Lilian dipped her head one more time and then walked away from the doorway.

Zoey stared at the empty doorway, suddenly realizing that Lilian would have been her best student. “Family. Right. Family.”

When that British Literature class ended – a class marred with too many absences and lack of discussion because the handful of student who did show up hadn’t done the reading -- Zoey’s summer

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<sup>1</sup> Milton, John. *Samson Agonistes*. Lines 1-11.

break officially began. Yet she continued to come to El Centro College, to toil away in her little office, organizing papers, making adjustments to her curriculum, researching methods to make her classes better, and writing recommendation letters because, unlike Lilian, she had no family.

“You’re still here?” was the universal response from anyone who saw her on campus, from the administrative assistant, to the dean, to fellow faculty members who were actually teaching the second summer session.

Even after nearly crashing into a homeless man on the sidewalk outside of the main college building, Zoey continued to come on campus in the name of next semester’s class preparation.

“Do you have any special plans for the summer?” one of the new adjunct instructors had asked, making small-talk over the workroom coffee machine as it was brewing.

“Not really.” Zoey stared at the coffee machine, willing it to brew faster.

“No significant other?”

“No.”

“Kids?” her new co-worker persisted.

“No.”

“Parents? Siblings? Family?”

“Only if you count my cat, and she’s pretty low-maintenance.”

“Hobbies?”

“Does reading literature for my classes count?”

Her co-worker, a perky young woman with blond highlights and an eyebrow stud, shook her head. “You’re like a nun in the Church of Academia.”

Zoey only shrugged. “I’m cool with that.”

She shook her head again. “You’re full-time. If I were you, I’d enjoy my summer vacation.”

Later that night, Zoey thought about her words as she got ready for bed. She thought about Lilian and her lilting voice reciting the words of Milton with bittersweet confidence. With her cat curled up next to her, she reread that passage of *Samson Agonistes* and let an old, familiar sadness wash over her.

“Ah well,” she said to her empty room, her empty home.

She set down her book, switched off the end table lamp, and fell asleep.

Not too soon after, the dreams came again.